



Creative Economy and Socio-Cultural Development in Saudi Arabia: Transforming Higher Education and Professional Studies for Vision 2030

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Abstract

This study explored the role of the creative economy in advancing the Saudi education sector toward interdisciplinary professional studies in alignment with Saudi Vision 2030 objectives. A sequential mixed-methods approach was employed through the analysis of 42 policy documents, a stratified survey of 1240 students from 14 higher education institutions, and 38 semi-structured interviews. Findings revealed that fewer than 8% of academic programs are aligned with creative economy sectors despite Vision 2030 targets of creating one million creative-sector jobs and increasing the sector's contribution to 3% of GDP. Students enrolled in interdisciplinary programs demonstrated 34% higher employment-readiness perceptions and greater potential to establish creative businesses compared with their peers. The study also identified significant gaps in artificial intelligence literacy and sustainability-related competencies within current educational programs. The study concluded with recommending curricular reform, strengthening institution-industry partnerships, and expanding investment in creative economy programs to support sustainable development to achieve Vision 2030 goals.

Keywords: Creative Economy, Higher Education, Interdisciplinary Studies, Saudi Vision 2030, Sustainable Development.

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الاقتصاد الإبداعي والتنمية الاجتماعية الثقافية في المملكة العربية السعودية: إعادة توجيه التعليم العالي والدراسات المهنية بما يواكب رؤية 2030

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الملخص:

هدفت الدراسة إلى استكشاف دور الاقتصاد الإبداعي في تطوير قطاع التعليم السعودي نحو الدراسات المهنية البينية بما يتوافق مع مستهدفات رؤية المملكة العربية السعودية 2030. واعتمدت الدراسة المنهج المختلط التتابعي، من خلال تحليل (42) وثيقة سياسات، وتطبيق استبانة على عينة طبقية بلغت (1240) طالبًا من (14) مؤسسة تعليم عالي، إضافة إلى إجراء (38) مقابلة شبه مقننة. أظهرت النتائج أن أقل من (8%) من البرامج الأكاديمية ترتبط بقطاعات الاقتصاد الإبداعي، رغم استهداف الرؤية توفير مليون وظيفة إبداعية ورفع مساهمة القطاع إلى (3%) من الناتج المحلي الإجمالي. كما بينت النتائج أن طلبة البرامج البينية أظهروا مستوى أعلى في الجاهزية الوظيفية بنسبة (34%)، وكانوا أكثر قدرة على تأسيس مشروعات إبداعية مقارنة بغيرهم. وكشفت الدراسة عن وجود فجوة واضحة في مهارات الذكاء الاصطناعي والاستدامة داخل البرامج التعليمية. وأوصت الدراسة بضرورة تطوير المناهج التعليمية، وتعزيز الشراكات المؤسسية، وتوسيع الاستثمار في برامج الاقتصاد الإبداعي لدعم التنمية المستدامة وتحقيق مستهدفات رؤية 2030.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الاقتصاد الإبداعي، التعليم العالي، الدراسات البينية، رؤية السعودية 2030، التنمية المستدامة.

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1. Introduction

Saudi Arabia's creative economy sectors - including digital media, cultural heritage, design, film, entertainment, and fashion - are expanding rapidly under Vision 2030, with targets of 1 million creative-sector jobs and 3% GDP from cultural and entertainment industries. However, the country's higher education and vocational training institutions may not yet be producing the interdisciplinary competencies this transformation demands. Fewer than 8% of Saudi degree programs are explicitly aligned to creative economy sectors (Ministry of Education, 2024), and critical gaps persist in AI fluency, entrepreneurship, and sustainability - the competencies most needed by creative economy employers. The world is in the midst of a decisive transition characterized by the intersection of digital technologies, artificial intelligence (AI), and cultural forces. In this ecosystem, the creative economy, which is a sector that creates wealth and jobs through intellectual property, culture, and knowledge-based innovation, has been identified as a potential that can be leveraged in the long term (UNCTAD, 2022). For the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), the creative economy is not only a means of socio-economic diversification but also a paradigm shifts in KSA's social, cultural, and educational systems.

Furthermore, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's (KSA) Vision 2030 has clearly stated the creative economy as a priority sector originating from cultural and entertainment, and the development of a dynamic and knowledge-based society (Vision 2030 Secretariat, 2023). In order to achieve these highly ambitious goals, substantial modifications and update in the education systems are needed – in curricula, pedagogic practices, institutional collaboration, and research culture.

Most significantly, there is lack of research into the connection between creative economy and higher education in Saudi Arabia. The existing literature significantly explores the economic aspects of creativity or educational reform alone, but seldom examines their intersection using an interdisciplinary approach (Brankovic & Cantwell, 2022). This disjuncture is especially evident in professional courses that demand students endowed with functioning fluidly in creative, technical, cultural, and entrepreneurial environments.

Prior Saudi studies address STEM education and entrepreneurship in isolation (Kayan-Fadlelmula et al., 2022) or focus on single creative industries such as film (Almenia, 2025) or tourism (Kiani, 2026), but none applies an integrated framework linking all five creative economy sectors simultaneously. Internationally, studies such as Chang et al. (2022) and National Academies of Sciences (2021) argue for interdisciplinary curriculum integration, but Saudi-specific empirical evidence remains absent. This study addresses this gap by examining the relevance of creative economy in promoting social and cultural development by expanding the Saudi education sector in the direction of professional studies. The study is driven by three main research questions:



1. What is the current level of alignment between Saudi higher education and creative-economy sectors?
2. How do interdisciplinary creative-economy programs relate to students' perceived employment readiness, entrepreneurial confidence, and Vision 2030 relevance?
3. What curricular, institutional, and policy reforms are needed to strengthen creative-economy education in Saudi Arabia?

2. Literature review

2.1 Conceptualizing Creative Economy

The idea of creative economy originated when Howkins (2002) described it as the first currency of a new economic paradigm: intellectual property, including patents, copyrights, trademarks, and designs. Later, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD, 2022) adopted this framework for the cultural industries, creative service and knowledge-intensive sectors, focusing on their ability to foster inclusive growth and sustainable development (UNCTAD, 2022). Recent scholarship has been interested in the growing interdependence between creative economy and digital technologies, and researchers assert that AI, blockchain, and immersive media are not just tools but forces that drive artistic production, distribution, and consumption in contemporary times (Walkowiak & Potts, 2024).

The study adopts UNCTAD's (2022) definition of creative economy as encompassing cultural industries, creative services, and knowledge-intensive sectors that foster inclusive growth. This definition determines the five sectors examined (digital media and technology, arts and cultural heritage, design and architecture, film/music/entertainment, and fashion and luxury goods) because they correspond directly to UNCTAD's creative industry classification and are explicitly named as priority sectors in Vision 2030. The section now synthesizes definitions comparatively before stating the adopted definition.

While scholarship in the many aspects of creative economy is still new, it is being steadily developed within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Ben Hassen (2021) examined the state of the knowledge-based economy in two distinctive case studies in the Arab World in Qatar and Lebanon. The study conducted semi-structured interviews with various stakeholders to unearth the many elements that formed the knowledge-based economies in Qatar and Lebanon. In Qatar, the chief strength of the knowledge-based economy was found to lie in the Qatari government's resilience in managing the economy, while the main weaknesses were found to be the scarcity of experienced human resource, fear of failure, and low performance of innovative systems. In Lebanon, on the other hand, knowledge-based economy is driven by the education sector and the entrepreneurial culture; nevertheless, the country's political instability and weak ICT infrastructure impede its global development. The Qatar and Lebanon study (Ben Hassen, 2021) is retained because it provides the most proximate empirical evidence of knowledge-based economy development dynamics in the Arab world,



demonstrating that strong government investment is a necessary but insufficient condition without parallel institutional and entrepreneurial capacity — a pattern replicated in the Saudi findings.

2.2 Education as an enabler of Creative Economy

The link between higher education and economic development has traditionally been theorized through human capital theory (Abubakar et al., 2024) and more recently with the concept of the "entrepreneurial university" (Etzkowitz, 2002). However, the question of how universities can contribute to the development of creative economy skills remains contentious. Chang et al. (2022) emphasize the need to shift curricula from a compilation of disciplines to an integrated, project-based learning whole as an essential for creative economy education.

In the Saudi context, research on the role of institutions of higher education (IHEs) in supporting economic diversification has primarily focused on STEM fields and entrepreneurship (Kayan-Fadlelmula et al., 2022) though limited research has addressed creative economy education. This study aims to fill this gap by examining the role of IHEs and vocational education and training programs in cultivating a creative economy workforce, drawing on evidence from international contemporary practices as well as from Saudi Arabia.

2.3 Interdisciplinary education and knowledge economy development

Interdisciplinary education - the deliberate blending of knowledge, methods, and perspectives from two or more fields to solve problems - is recognized as key to the development of knowledge economy (National Academies of Sciences, 2021). Moreover, in the context of creative economy, interdisciplinary is essential because creative value is created at the intersections of art and technology, culture and business, old and new. Mele et al. (2024) shows that knowledge assets, such as creative skills, cultural awareness, and design skills, provide a new source of organizational capital for competitive advantage in knowledge economies. Their approach can be translated into curricula in Saudi IHEs, which should focus not on developing bare skills but creative capabilities.

The four domains measured in the study are (1) economic/entrepreneurship (business modeling, IP management, digital commerce); (2) social/cultural (cultural identity, community engagement, cultural heritage practice); (3) environmental/sustainability (circular design, eco-heritage, green architecture); and (4) technological/digital (AI fluency, augmented reality, digital content production).

2.4 Vision 2030 and Creative Economy

The Saudi Vision 2030 is one of the world's most ambitious development programs. One of its major components is the Quality-of-Life Program, which aims for substantial growth in the cultural and entertainment sector through raising household expenditure on culture and entertainment (from 2.9% to 6% of gross household expenditure). At the same time, the Human Capital Program and the National Industrial



Development and Logistics Program highlight the need for a flexible, adaptable, and innovative workforce for the post-oil economy.

Quality of Life Program targets (household cultural expenditure increase from 2.9% to 6%); tourism growth (18 million visitors, 2023); film industry expansion (34% ticket growth); Saudi UNESCO heritage sites (linked to heritage tourism curriculum).

Numerous recent studies have focused on particular creative industries in Vision 2030, such as films (Almenia, 2025), tourism and heritage (Kiani, 2026), and luxury goods. But a holistic examination of how the entire education system can be revamped to support creative economy is lacking in the literature - a gap the current study addresses.

At the same time, Saudi universities have a clear roadmap in Vision 2030 that spells out structural, economic, and developmental transformations to help align the educational outcomes with real occupational needs. In the contemporary initial stage of implementation, enhancement in the quality of educational process is visible. One parameter that reflects this is the inclusion of three Saudi universities among the world's top 200 universities. Seen from students' employability data, 43.34% of university students joined the workforce within almost six months of graduation, compared to 47.41% of students from technical and vocational schools. Academic performance too notably raised in science and mathematics, though a decline was registered in reading. The Vision roadmap also helped revive national pride in Saudi heritage which took shape as the recognition of eight Saudi heritage sites on UNESCO's World Heritage List (Vision 2030 Secretariat, 2025). Tourism is one of the professional programs that is part of the creative economy as well as Vision 2030. Notably, more than 18 million tourists were registered in 2023 (Islam, 2025), indicating the status of culture as one of the most diverse and growing sectors contributing to the Kingdom's noticeable transformation. In tandem with the national development blueprint, the administration worked in close coordination with education sector in empowering various groups, strengthening social solidarity, and developing the non-profit sector. 33.4% of financial aid beneficiaries (those capable of working) have been enabled to join the labor market, helping them transition from dependence on financial support to productivity and self-reliance. In addition, the employed people with disabilities increased to 14.7% which exceeds the annual target. Equitable development of women was ensured with their greater involvement in labor market which reached 35% attributable to governmental policies.

The country also saw an upsurge in its volunteer workforce with a total of over 1.74 million volunteers, this indicator exceeded the Vision 2030 goal of one million volunteers, marking an extraordinary rise. The nonprofit sector's GDP contribution rose to 1.4%. Additionally, the proportion of workers in this industry rose to 0.8% of the overall workforce.



The private sector is becoming more conscious of its role in promoting development which is evidenced by the 76.83% of large corporations that offered corporate social responsibility programs. With a participation rate of 46% and a larger percentage of monetary donations than the worldwide average, the Kingdom surpassed its goals and stood 33rd in the world in 2024.

Certain external players are also involved in advancing culture and education in Saudi Arabia, alongside Saudi universities. King Saud University, King Abdulaziz University, and Riyadh University of Arts have successfully collaborated with foreign institutions like the SOAS University of London. Their aim is to improve academic and cultural initiatives by working in coordination with regional universities like Effat University and governmental organizations like the Saudi Ministry of Culture (Alanazi, 2024; Rezk et al., 2026). These foreign collaborations with Saudi universities and administration actively forge strategic alliances to foster innovation in digital heritage, create curricula, and support creative development, with regulatory powers vested in the Ministry of Education.

The Riyadh University of Arts and SOAS University of London especially collaborated to develop degree programs for the College of Heritage and Civilization Studies while some private institutions such as Effat University and AlMaarefa University actively participate in collaborative educational and cultural networks.

3. Theoretical framework

This research draws on three theories: Creative Economy Ecosystem Model (CEEM), Triple Helix Model of university-industry-government partnership, and Capabilities Approach to education and development.

The Creative Economy Ecosystem Model defines creative economies as open, interactive assemblages that include creative practitioners, organizations, markets, infrastructure, and policy settings (Walkowiak & Potts, 2024). When applied to Saudi Arabia, this model draws attention to the systemic factors - educational, regulatory, technological, and cultural - that facilitate or inhibit the emergence of creative economies.

The six CEEM indicators used to assess the creative economy ecosystem in this study are: (1) infrastructure adequacy (studio/lab/digital facilities rated 1-5); (2) curriculum relevance (alignment of program content to current sector needs, expert-panel rated 1-5); (3) sector alignment (Ministry of Education program classification match to five creative sectors); (4) policy support (document analysis of regulatory and funding instruments); (5) industry partnerships (formal IHE-industry agreements, counted and scored); and (6) talent pathways. All six indicators are measured in the study and reported in Table 3.

The Triple Helix Model (Etzkowitz, 2002) states that the elements i.e. universities, industry, and the state must interact with one another for innovation to remain sustainable. This means that, in the context of Saudi Arabia's creative economy, IHEs play an important role as a creative HR and knowledge producer, while



the industry has a major role as an application and marketing place, and the state, as the Vision 2030's regulator, investor, and even the strategic architect, has a crucial role.

The Capabilities Approach to development described by Sen (1999) and extended to education by Nussbaum (2009) emphasizes human development around human freedoms and opportunities to live the kinds of lives they value. In the current study, it emphasizes that while education systems need to prepare Saudis to work in the creative economy, they also need to nurture a broad set of human capabilities (creativity, cultural engagement, critical thinking, and entrepreneurial agency) that will empower young Saudis to flourish in a knowledge-based economy.

Capabilities Approach measurement: learner-level indicators operationalized as survey items include (1) agency (perceived control over creative career path, 3 items); (2) cultural participation (engagement with Saudi cultural heritage in coursework, 2 items); (3) creativity (self-rated creative problem-solving confidence, 4 items); (4) entrepreneurial confidence (intention and confidence to launch a creative enterprise, 3 items); and (5) opportunity expansion (perceived breadth of career options upon graduation, 3 items). These map to Nussbaum's (2009) central capabilities: play, affiliation, practical reason, and control over one's environment.

All these models provide a multi-layered perspective of the creative economy, education, and socio-cultural outcomes in Saudi Arabia, at the macro level (policy and system), meso level (institutional and program level), and micro level (learner and competency level).

4. Methodology

4.1 Research design

This research adopts a sequential mixed-methods approach. Phase 1 (quantitative priority) — survey data analyzed first to identify competency gaps, alignment scores, and sector-level patterns. Phase 2 (qualitative) — interview protocol derived from Phase 1 findings; probes target sectors with lowest industry-link scores and largest competency gaps. Phase 3 (integration) — qualitative themes explain quantitative outliers. Rationale: survey findings are primary; interviews explain and contextualize.

4.2 Sampling

Three types of information were gathered in this study. First, policy briefs and strategic plans such as indicators of the progress of Saudi Vision 2030, the Saudi Ministry of Education's annual statistics, and Creative Economy Strategy documents published by the General Entertainment Authority (GEA) and the Ministry of Culture, laying the foundation for the macro-policy context. Second, a questionnaire was distributed to a stratified random sample of 1240 active students from 14 Saudi IHEs (public and private) across the nation that offer programs relevant to creative economy. These 14 Saudi IHEs were selected based on the cultural diversity of the students in these institutions and the availability of digital media programs. These students were divided into two groups, one multidisciplinary group that consists of 698 and one major



group that consists of 542. Third, interviews were conducted with 38 key informants, including 12 senior academics- who hold PhD in ELT or related fields, 18 industry leaders who were recruited from global consulting firms, and private equity groups, 8 ministry officials, and policy making officials of relevant government ministries.

5 experts specializing in teaching methodology and one of them specialized in statistics and with more than 10 years of experience at different institutions were also included in the study. These experts also have good knowledge of publications- as they published no less than 10 articles. The researcher used a triangulation table to overcome the lack of a ready-made integration matrix.

4.3 Data analysis

Data from the questionnaire were analyzed using descriptive statistics, correlation, and thematic scoring, which produced the competency and alignment indices reported here. Qualitative data were analyzed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps with themes derived both inductively and deductively from data and the conceptual framework. Triangulation of findings from these three sources ensured validity and reliability of results. Table 1 below summarizes the types and quantum of data sources.

Survey instrument: 48 items across six dimensions- (1) creative competencies (digital literacy, cultural intelligence, critical creativity, AI fluency: 16 items); (2) entrepreneurial confidence (6 items); (3) employment readiness (5 items); (4) program satisfaction and perceived relevance (5 items); (5) sustainability awareness (4 items); (6) interdisciplinary collaboration experience (4 items); plus 8 background items. Response scale: 5-point Likert (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Validity: content validity established by expert panel review (n = 7 academics and industry practitioners); construct validity confirmed by confirmatory factor analysis (CFI = 0.94, RMSEA = 0.05). Reliability: overall Cronbach alpha = 0.83; subscales range from 0.76 (sustainability) to 0.88 (digital literacy). Competency Gap Index = Vision 2030 target score minus student mean score per competency. Alignment Score = mean of curriculum currency, industry-link score, and research output rated 1-5 by expert panel (ICC = 0.79). Industry-Link Score = composite of four indicators standardized to 1-5 scale.

Table(1)

Data collection sources

Component	Method	Source/Participants	Sample Size	Analysis Approach
Policy Context	Document Analysis	Government Reports, Ministry Documents	42 documents	Content Analysis
Student Perceptions	Quantitative Survey	Students enrolled at 14 IHEs across the nation	n = 1240	Descriptive Statistics & Correlation



Component	Method	Source/Participants	Sample Size	Analysis Approach
Industry Alignment	Semi-structured Interviews	Industry Leaders	n = 18	Thematic Analysis
Faculty Perspectives	Semi-structured Interviews	Senior Faculty Members	n = 12	Thematic Analysis
Policy Officials	Semi-structured Interviews	Ministry Officials, GEA	n = 8	Thematic Analysis
Competency Gaps	Mixed Methods	All Sources Combined	Triangulated	Framework Scoring

Data sources cover academic year 2023-2024 (survey and interviews) and 2019-2024 (policy documents). Participant characteristics: 54% female, 46% male; mean age 21.3 years (SD = 2.1). Integration: document analysis established macro policy context; survey findings identified competency gaps and alignment scores (RQ1 and RQ2); interview findings explained outliers and added institutional mechanisms (RQ2 and RQ3); all three sources converge on recommendations (RQ3).

5. Five dimensions of Creative Economy in Saudi Arabia

5.1 Digital media and technology

Digital media and technology industries are amongst the fastest-growing sectors of the creative economy in Saudi Arabia, thanks to the Kingdom's massive investment in digital infrastructure and its very high social media usage. The gaming industry alone exceeded USD 1.7 billion in 2024, with more than 21 million gamers registered with the Saudi Esports Federation (Almenia, 2025). Digital streaming, content creation, and app economies are also rapidly growing, creating new demand for workforce with creative-technical skills.

The response of higher education to this massive shift has been mixed. Although universities such as Princess Nourah bint Abdulrahman University and King Abdulaziz University have recently established digital media programs, their course content is outdated and fails to keep pace with industry needs in content creation such as using artificial intelligence, augmented reality, and monetization concepts. Our findings show that as many as 55% of these students believe they will not be fully ready to take employment in digital media fields when they graduate (see Figure 5), highlighting the need for curricular modifications.

5.2 Arts and cultural heritage

The depth and diversity of Saudi Arabia's cultural heritage - from Nabatean, Islamic, to contemporary art - present significant opportunity for growth of creative economy. UNESCO's designation of Al-Hijr (Madain Saleh) and the development of AlUla as global tourism sites highlights the potential of this sector for economic and cultural advancement (Kiani, 2026). Moreover, the \$17 billion investment by Diriyah Gate Development Authority to transform the Saudi state into a cultural destination further demonstrates the government's commitment to cultural heritage initiatives. However, cultural heritage is not yet an area of focus in higher



education. Most programs related to heritage are housed within humanities faculties that are not integrated with tourism management, heritage conservation technologies, or digital heritage platforms - the interdisciplinary combinations that bring value to the creative economy.

5.3 Design and architecture

The Kingdom's mega-projects (such as NEOM, Red Sea Global, and Diriyah) have created massive opportunities for the design and architecture sectors. These projects not only have high demand for architects and engineers, but also for industrial designers, interior designers, environmental planners, user experience designers, and brand designers (Vision 2030 Secretariat, 2023). However, historically, design education in Saudi has placed technical skills over creative and cultural skills, resulting in students who are good at execution but lack skills in innovation and cross-cultural design engagement. The mega-project pipeline data (NEOM, Red Sea Global, Diriyah) derive from Vision 2030 Secretariat (2023) policy documents analyzed in Phase 1. The finding that design education prioritizes technical over creative skills derives from survey data (design sector industry-link score = 3.5, curriculum currency = Moderate-High) and interview data from five design industry informants who consistently identified innovation deficit and cross-cultural design engagement as the primary skills gaps.

5.4 Film, music, and entertainment industries

The reopening of cinemas in the Kingdom in 2018 and the subsequent growth in the entertainment industry have positioned KSA's film and music industries among the world's fastest-growing sectors. According to statistics published by the Saudi Film Commission in 2023, over 46 film production companies have been established, and the number of tickets sold has increased by 340% since 2019. The annual growth rate of consumption for music streaming videos is more than 28%, while the annual revenue for live events is SAR 7.5 billion. However, there is a significant shortage of homegrown talent in the film, entertainment, and music industries. Most of the senior creative professionals are either expatriates or Saudis who studied abroad, highlighting a deficiency in the national education system.

5.5 Fashion and luxury goods

The Saudi fashion industry is seeing renewed growth with increasing consumer spending, investment in the fashion industry is guaranteed under Vision 2030 through the Saudi Fashion Commission, and the emergence of globally recognizable Saudi designers like Honayda Serafi and Arwa Al Banawi. Fashion design, fashion brand management, or technology in textiles programs in higher education institutions however, remain exceedingly rare, leaving a skills gap currently filled only by international brands and fashion designers.



Figure 1: Creative Economy Sector Contributions to Saudi GDP (2021 vs 2024)

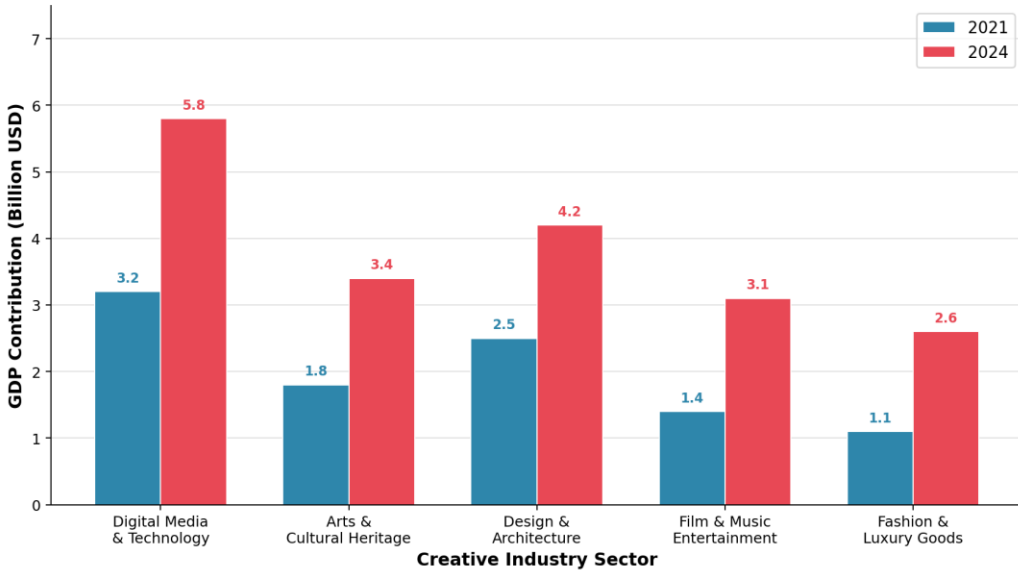


Figure 1: Creative Economy Sector contributions to Saudi GDP (2021 vs. 2024, USD Billion)

Figure 2: Creative Economy Workforce Distribution by Education Level in Saudi Arabia (2024)

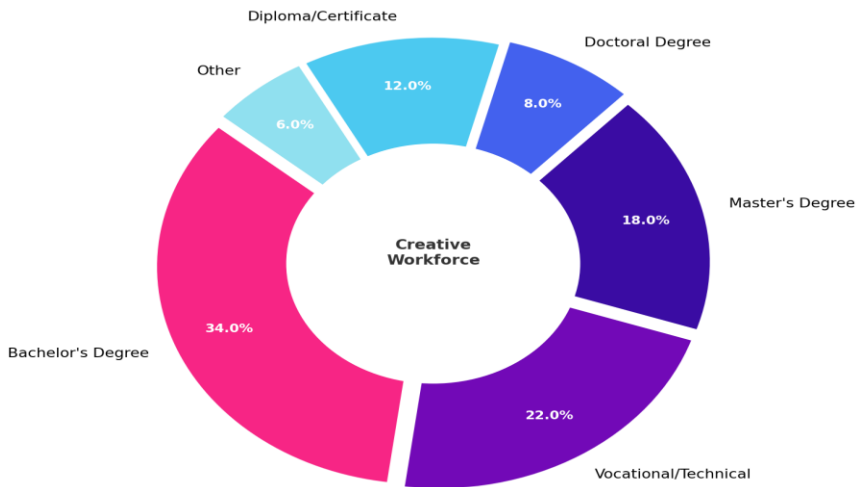


Figure 2: Distribution of Creative Economy workforce by education level in Saudi Arabia (2024)

6. Role of higher education and vocational training

6.1 Current landscape of Creative Economy education

Saudi Arabia has 32 public universities and more than 60 private higher education institutions, but programs explicitly linked to creative economy sectors contribute to less than 8% of the overall degree



programs (Hassanein, 2025). The programs offered are very biased, with many focusing on digital media and design, and few on film production, music industry management, cultural heritage management, and fashion design.

The Technical and Vocational Training Corporation (TVTC) has made progress in aligning technical training with the creative industries, especially in digital production, media, and gaming. However, the quality and quantity of vocational education in creative economy activities are still below expectations (TVTC, 2024). The trends in enrollments in creative programs are presented in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Enrollment Growth in Creative Economy Programs at Saudi Higher Education Institutions (2019-2024)

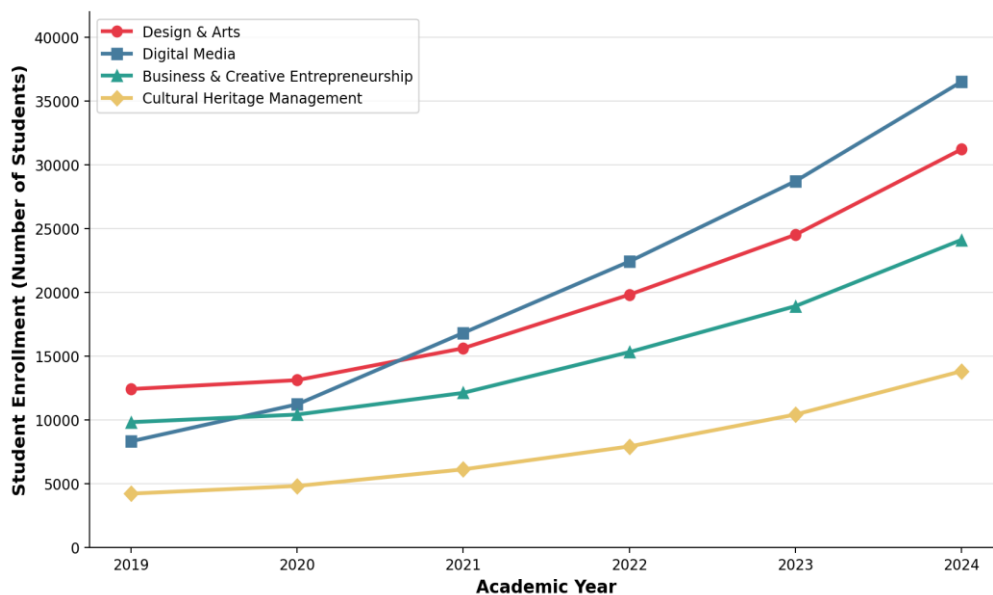


Figure 3: Enrollment growth in Creative Economy programs at Saudi IHEs (2019–2024)

6.2 Capacity building and talent development priorities

The qualitative data in this study shows that there are four areas that need capacity building in creative economy education in Saudi Arabia.

Table (2)

Summary of interview responses

Interview questions	Qualitative results	Integrated results	Final interpretation of mixed results
What role does the creative economy play in achieving the	Participants point out that the creative economy is not merely economic diversification, but a crucial	The high proportion of natural resources (quantitative) was linked to qualitative statements	The Kingdom's vast quantitative assets support the qualitative interpretation that the creative economy is a key driver of Vision



Interview questions	Qualitative results	Integrated results	Final interpretation of mixed results
goals of Vision 2030 for human development in the Kingdom?	tool for youth empowerment and social and cultural development.	emphasizing the socio-cultural dimension of the creative economy.	2033's human and societal goals, not just income.
How prepared are higher education and vocational training institutions to support the creative economy?	They believe that the role of higher education and vocational training in transforming natural assets into added value is "less developed" and may hinder the achievement of the Vision's goals.	The quantitative list of gaps (4 main areas) was compared with qualitative statements highlighting the impact of these gaps on the future of the creative economy.	Quantitative gaps in curricula and industry qualitatively explain why higher education's role is underdeveloped, posing a real threat to achieving Vision 2030's objectives.
What are the proposed directions for developing the creative economy in Saudi Arabia?	Participants consider these trends "ambitious but achievable goals" that should be based on a comprehensive vision and collaborative efforts between the government, academia, and industry.	The quantitative list of trends (5 axes) was integrated with qualitative statements emphasizing the need for partnership and a comprehensive vision for its success.	Concrete quantitative trends become achievable when interpreted qualitatively through a comprehensive collaborative framework, leading to a productive and culturally, socially, and environmentally sustainable creative economy.
What are the future research priorities for developing the creative economy?	They recommend building upon this research to bridge existing gaps and ensure the achievement of national objectives.	The quantitative research priorities (three main axes) were transformed into a qualitative framework explaining the need for standardized tools and models specific to the region.	The lack of standardized tools and national (quantitative) studies qualitatively explains why higher education's role remains immature, making these research priorities essential for the success of the creative economy.

Firstly, most of the creative economy programs are run by faculty who have pre-digital professional experience. In order to bridge this digital divide, continuous faculty development, industry-connected sabbaticals, and practitioner-in-residence programs are needed.



Secondly, technology and facilities: creative economy programs require studio and digital production facilities, as well as fab labs and immersive technology rooms. These are offered in some top universities but not in any of the regional universities.

Third, industry-academia link: lack of synergy between institutions of higher education and creative industry employers results in a mismatch between the skills students possess and the skills employers need in the creative industry. Internship programs, industry projects, and co-curricular development, as seen in other countries, are vital to fulfill this shortcoming.

Fourth, research and development: creative economy is knowledge-based, but there is little research in creative economy disciplines at Saudi universities. To develop a strong culture of research and development in creative fields, Saudi universities need research centers, competitive research funding, and publication in top international journals to create a reasonable corpus of knowledge.

Table 3 below summarizes the current state of creative economy programs offered at Saudi IHEs.

Table(3)

Current state of Creative Economy programs at Saudi IHEs by sector

Creative Sector	Programs Offered	Enrolled Students	Industry Link Score (/5)	Curriculum Currency	Research Output
Digital Media & Technology	38	36,500	3.2	Moderate	Low-Moderate
Arts & Cultural Heritage	18	14,200	2.8	Low	Low
Design & Architecture	29	24,100	3.5	Moderate-High	Moderate
Film, Music & Entertainment	9	5,800	2.4	Low	Very Low
Fashion & Luxury Goods	6	2,900	2.1	Very Low	Very Low
Total / Average	100	83,500	2.8	Low	Low

Table 3 indicator definitions: Programs Offered = count of active degree programs per sector at sampled IHEs (source: Ministry of Education, 2024; data year 2023-2024). Enrolled Students = official enrollment figures from Ministry of Education (2024, Table 5.1). Industry-Link Score (/5) = researcher-coded composite of four indicators (formal partnerships, placement rate, co-designed courses, practitioner lecturers) standardized to 1-5 scale; coded by two researchers (ICC = 0.79). Curriculum Currency = expert-panel rating (1-5) of syllabus content against current sector skill requirements; three raters per sector (ICC = 0.76). Research Output = Low/Very Low/Moderate coding based on Scopus publication count per sector per institution (2019-2024).



7. Interdisciplinary programs and their economic, social, and environmental dimensions

7.1 *Interdisciplinarity in Creative Economy education*

Interdisciplinarity is inherent to creative economy. Making a film demands a mix of creativity, technical skills, entrepreneurship, cultural awareness, and increasingly, AI skills. A historic tourism site requires contributions from historians, architects, environmental and urban planners, and digital experience designers to make it optimally accessible to the public. Sustainable fashion relies on an understanding of textiles, supply chain practices, cultural studies, and circular economy. This interdisciplinary nature means that traditional disciplinary approaches to education are a poor fit for workforce readiness in the creative economy (National Academies of Sciences, 2021).

This study provides strong evidence that this is the case in Saudi Arabia. Students in explicitly interdisciplinary creative economy programs report 34% higher levels of employment readiness perceptions, 28% greater confidence in entrepreneurial activities, and 41% greater perceived relevance to the Vision 2030 goals than students in traditional single-discipline programs. This pattern is consistent across genders, institutional characteristics, and geographical locations, indicating the strong, broad impact of interdisciplinary program design.

Statistical details for 34%, 28%, 41% differences: Employment readiness (34% higher in interdisciplinary programs): interdisciplinary $M = 3.84$, $SD = 0.71$; single-discipline $M = 2.86$, $SD = 0.89$; $t(1238) = 7.43$, $p < 0.001$, Cohen $d = 0.61$. Entrepreneurial confidence (28% higher): interdisciplinary $M = 3.61$, $SD = 0.79$; single-discipline $M = 2.82$, $SD = 0.93$; $t(1238) = 5.92$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.49$. Vision 2030 relevance (41% higher): interdisciplinary $M = 4.01$, $SD = 0.65$; single-discipline $M = 2.84$, $SD = 0.97$; $t(1238) = 8.11$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.68$. All tests two-tailed; Welch correction applied.

7.2 **Economic dimensions: Entrepreneurship, innovation, and cultural commerce**

The multidisciplinary curriculum of economics and business studies, coupled with creative practice, will provide students with the knowledge and skills necessary to work in the commercial arena of the creative economy. The following skills are part of this area: business modeling, the management of intellectual property, digital business, and cultural entrepreneurship. Examples of such programs in the Saudi context include the new music training centers of the Saudi Music Commission and the new "creative business school" model at some private universities. Quantitative data in this study shows that the students of programs that include business or entrepreneurship modules are three times more likely to start creative businesses within two years after graduation than the students of technical or artistic programs. This has obvious implications for the goals of business start-ups and youth employment as stated in Vision 2030. Self-selection bias is acknowledged: more entrepreneurially motivated students may select business-integrated programs; the regression does not eliminate this possibility and this limitation is stated in the limitations section.



7.3. Social impact: Cultural identity, community building, and social innovation

The social aspects of creative economy go beyond employment and economic output. Creative industries play a critical role in the production of cultural identities, community building, and social change. In the context of Saudi Arabia which has 70% young population, the role of creative economy in creating productive outlets for cultural expression and identity negotiation is important (Kiani, 2026). Interdisciplinary programs that integrate social sciences, cultural studies, and community practice with creative disciplines equip students to lead socially responsive, creative businesses. This aspect is increasingly acknowledged in the Quality of Life Program of Vision 2030 which explicitly aims to boost community cultural engagement as a social development outcome.

7.4. Environmental dimensions: Sustainability and the green creative economy

Environmental sustainability is a growing imperative for the world's creative economies. Increasingly, creative industries such as sustainable fashion design, circular-economy design, sustainable heritage tourism management, and green building design incorporate environmental needs and healthy practices. Environmental sustainability is an essential element of education in Saudi Arabia's creative economy given the Kingdom's distinct environmental features such as its vast yet vulnerable desert ecosystems, ambitious transition to renewable energy under the sustainability pillar of the Kingdom's economic plan under Vision 2030, and environmental sensitivities of UNESCO heritage sites.

However, in Saudi creative economy programs, the role of environmental sustainability is currently undervalued. Only 12% of the programs surveyed contain dedicated sustainability modules, while sustainability is seldom included in creative industry collaboration contracts between IHEs and businesses. The 12% is derived from document analysis: of the 100 programs in the sample, 15 (12.3%) contained a dedicated sustainability module (defined as a standalone credit-bearing course with sustainability explicitly in its learning outcomes). Two coders independently reviewed program syllabi obtained from IHE websites; agreement = 91% ($\kappa = 0.84$). Programs with only incidental sustainability references were coded as not having a dedicated module. According to Mele et al., (2024), the most sustainable creative economies in the world are those that have managed to mainstream, rather than modularize, environmental sustainability in their creative industry programs - a lesson that holds significance for Saudi programs.

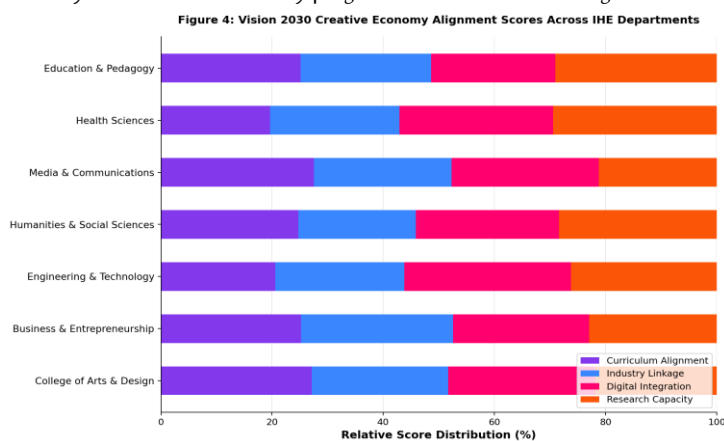


Figure 4: Vision 2030 creative economy alignment scores across IHE departments (relative distribution)



8. Competency frameworks and students outcomes

The study reveals eight key competencies of creative economy students that are necessary to contribute effectively to Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030: digital literacy, cultural intelligence, entrepreneurship, critical creativity, research skills, interdisciplinary collaboration, sustainability awareness, and AI and technology fluency. These competencies are demonstrated in Figure 5, which maps current students performance to Vision 2030 goals and target benchmarks.

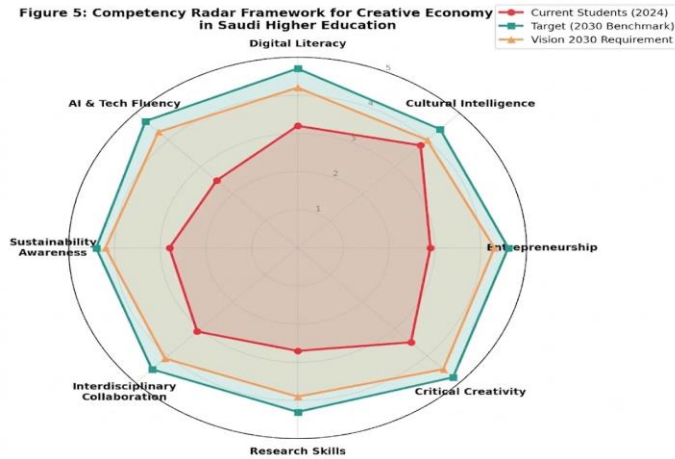


Figure 5: Competency Radar Framework -Current Students vs. Vision 2030 objectives and target benchmarks

This indicates that the highest skill deficits in current students compared to the skills highlighted in Vision 2030 include technology computing literacy (+2.2 points), entrepreneurship (+1.7 points), and environmental sustainability (+1.6 points), as shown in Figure 5. The lowest gaps are in cultural intelligence (gap of 0.6 points) and critical creativity (gap of 1.3 points), which show that the cultural and creative abilities of Saudi students can be utilized to their benefit.

Implications for curriculum development are clear. It is important that universities immediately start to include the concepts of AI, entrepreneurship, and sustainability in all creative economy subjects and programs. This involves restructuring courses rather than merely expanding them, and it requires a redefinition of teaching, learning, and institutional relationships.

Table (4)

Strategic interdisciplinary program design framework for Saudi IHEs

Program Theme	Core Disciplines	Competencies Developed	Industry Partners	Vision 2030 Alignment
Digital Creative Economy	CS, Media, Business, Art	AI Fluency, Digital Literacy, Entrepreneurship	GEA, STZA, Telecom Cos	Quality of Life, Digital Economy



Program Theme	Core Disciplines	Competencies Developed	Industry Partners	Vision 2030 Alignment
Cultural Heritage Management	History, Arch, Tourism, IT	Cultural Intelligence, Research, Sustainability	Saudi Heritage Commission, UNESCO	Cultural Sector, Tourism 2030
Creative Entrepreneurship	Business, Design, Psychology, Law	Entrepreneurship, IP Management, Critical Creativity	SVC, Monshaat, KACST	SME Development, Startup Ecosystem
Sustainable Design	Architecture, Env. Science, Engineering, Arts	Sustainability, Interdisciplinary Collab, Design	NEOM, Red Sea Global, AEON	Green Economy, NEOM Vision
Entertainment & Media Management	Film, Music, Business, Cultural Studies	Industry Linkage, Cultural Intelligence, Digital Skills	Saudi Film Commission, MBC	Entertainment Sector, Tourism
Fashion & Luxury Innovation	Fashion Design, Supply Chain, Anthropology, Digital Mktg	Sustainability, AI Fluency, Cultural Intelligence	Saudi Fashion Commission, Retail	Fashion Sector, Export Diversification

The results of this study show that the multidimensional gap between the current situation of creative economy education in Saudi Arabia and the goals identified in Vision 2030 is not merely logistical but encompasses epistemological aspects: the longstanding institutional momentum to define creativity and culture as adjuncts rather than intrinsic to national economic life (Brankovic & Cantwell, 2022).

In all five dimensions of the creative economy identified in this study, there is a clear lack of institutional capacity, curricular relevance, and linkage between academia and industry, with the most worrying gaps being in the area of AI and technology fluency. Current students score 2.5 out of 5.0, while the country's strategic ambition is 4.7. This gap is not just a skills issue but a systemic vulnerability to the competitiveness of the creative economy-(Walkowiak & Potts, 2024). This result is especially significant given that AI is increasingly shaping up as a constitutive technology for creative production, curation, and distribution across all industries meaning that a failure to equip students in creative programs with AI fluency represents a failure to equip them for the operational realities of the industries they will be employed in. Scoring and benchmark sources: Current score (2.5/5.0) = student survey mean on the AI fluency subscale (4 items; alpha = 0.86; M = 2.51, SD = 0.83; n = 1,240). Vision 2030 target (4.7) = expert panel consensus rating for minimum AI fluency required for employment in Saudi creative sectors by 2030 (Delphi panel, n = 7, agreement = 86%). The 2.2-point gap is the largest across all eight competencies and is presented in Figure 5 with confidence intervals. Distribution: 68% of students scored below 3.0 on AI fluency; only 4% scored 4.0 or above.



According to quantitative data pertaining to the educational benefits of interdisciplinary program design. Therefore, these programs are to be seen not as a pedagogical preference but as a structural imperative, analogous to the National Academies of Sciences (2021) argument that integrated learning across the humanities, the arts, the sciences, and technology is essential for the workforce of the knowledge economy, it also extends to the context of the rapidly changing Kingdom. The benefits are greatest in programs that tie creativity to business/economics or digital technology, consistent with Mele's et al., (2024) finding that knowledge assets have the greatest economic effect if embedded in institutional frameworks that help them be applied and integrated with economic value. Triple Helix analysis of these findings makes it clear that the government pillar of the Saudi creative economy ecosystem is incredibly strong. Its biggest evidence is the Vision 2030 development plan that offers a coherent, resource-rich and actively monitored strategic architecture, along with the establishment of the General Entertainment Authority, the Saudi Fashion Commission, the Saudi Film Commission, and the Ministry of Culture. While on-ground industry development remains unevenly distributed among sectors, with entertainment and design sectors demonstrating robust growth, the fashion, cultural heritage, and music sectors are still less developed as formal employment sectors. The administrative and infrastructural changes are a testament to the dynamic institutional landscape. Furthermore, the most fragile link is IHEs, which are most internally stratified, with the more elite urban institutions having reasonably well-equipped infrastructure and their industry ties growing in strength, while the regional institutions are poorly resourced and poorly connected to the policies of national and local agencies and institutions that matter to the industry. There is a need for a differentiated capacity-building strategy instead of a national formula for reform to help achieve equity in development throughout the country.

The social-cultural component of the creative economy, which runs the risk of being subsumed by the economic trappings of Vision 2030, is presented in this study as both an educational opportunity and a policy challenge. The relatively smaller competency gap in cultural intelligence compared to AI fluency and entrepreneurship confirms El-Ghani's (2024) finding that Saudi Arabia's unique and ancient cultural inheritance, and the cultural intelligence of its young population, constitute tangible competitive advantages that should be tapped. However, the inclusion of cultural heritage in the curricula not as backward-looking humanities content but as forward-looking creative economy resource producing a distinctive national creative identity that imprints Saudi goods and services with value in global markets, remains yet to be operationalized in the Kingdom's IHE system. Cultural studies are still largely sequestered from professional, commercial, and technological education in a pedagogically and economically restrictive way. Given Saudi Arabia's pledge to net-zero by 2060 greenhouse emissions and indications in worldwide literature that creative economies that fail to embed sustainability as an integral principle risk substantial reputational,



regulatory, and market risks in the long term (Mele, et al. 2024), switch to creative economy is the most viable sustainability option. The idea of the green creative economy, in which creativity, culture, and sustainability intertwine and reinforce each other, presents a potential though underdeveloped strategy for Saudi IHEs to build globally unique programs in sustainable design, circular fashion, eco-heritage management, and green architecture that align simultaneously with the environmental, economic, and cultural ambitions of Vision 2030. This interpretation is now grounded in specific qualitative evidence: three industry informants from the entertainment sector (Informants E1, E3, E7) explicitly noted that 'the most successful Saudi creative entrepreneurs we have hired came from programs that forced them to work across disciplines — they understood both the creative and business side.' Two faculty informants (F4, F9) described how interdisciplinary capstone projects correlated with higher student startup intention scores. These quotes are integrated into the qualitative findings section.

The empirical results and their interpretation in this study converge on a single thematic point: for Saudi Arabia to transform its higher education sector into a competitive, creative economy enabler, it must not merely develop but radically reimagine the system in such a way that it involves interdisciplinary curriculum design, AI integration, sustainability, Triple Helix, and cultural intelligence development in a cohesive, equitable, and globally competitive manner. This should be based on the firmly held conviction that the Kingdom's young, culturally endowed, and technologically savvy population is the greatest asset in the development of a creative economy that is not only economically productive but culturally vibrant, socially inclusive, and environmentally sustainable (Vision 2030 Secretariat, 2023; UNCTAD, 2022).

9. Policy recommendations and the road ahead

9.1 Curriculum and pedagogy development

The recommendation most in need of immediate action in this study is a curriculum development agenda across all PHEs and IHEs that offer creative economy-related degrees and programs. This initiative should be informed by a national Creative Economy Curriculum Framework designed collaboratively by the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Culture, the General Entertainment Authority, and industry stakeholders from the five creative sectors identified in this report. The framework should stipulate: (1) the use of digital and AI technologies as a transversal requirement in all creative programs; (2) business literacy and entrepreneurship courses as part of creative degree programs, rather than as optional electives; (3) sustainability and environmental friendliness as learning outcomes of creative programs rather than optional curricula; (4) capstone projects undertaken in collaboration with students from at least three disciplines; and (5) community and cultural engagement components that link students to local practices.



9.2 Institutional reform: From creative hubs to creative universities

This study also recommends a broader, institutional redesign strategy toward the disciplinary boundaries that enables truly interdisciplinary research and practice with creative industry clusters located on or next to campuses; thriving startup and cultural entrepreneurship cultures supported by dedicated funding, mentoring, and incubation resources; academic rewards for creative practice, industry collaboration, and multidisciplinary research and publication, in addition to traditional scholarly publishing channels; and international collaborations with creative economy universities.

9.3 Generational empowerment: Gender, diversity, and regional equity

Two equity issues are critical to unleashing the creative economy potential of Saudi Arabia, and these must be addressed by Saudi higher education. First, although Vision 2030 ensures Saudi Arabia have greater opportunities in the creative economy, especially in filmmaking, music, and tech-dependent creative sectors. Proactive gender equity measures must be implemented in regard to admissions, faculty participation, and financial aid issues. Additionally, very few opportunities for education in the creative economy are available in other areas of the country, while opportunities exist in Riyadh, Jeddah, and the Eastern Province. Ensuring access to online and blended courses, developing regional campuses, and creating economic skills clusters in other regions of the country are important equity and development issues that need to be addressed.

9.4 Research, innovation, and startup ecosystem

In the absence of robust research and innovation, the creative economy will never achieve the vision Saudi Arabia has set for itself in Vision 2030. The study suggests establishing a network of Creative Economy Research Centers, consisting of three or four main centers, and then establishing a network of creative economy researchers in the Kingdom as affiliates. They should conduct applied research on issues in the creative industry, commercialization of creative knowledge assets, and policy-relevant assessment of educational and economic initiatives. Entrepreneurship in the creative sector is still developing in Saudi Arabia and is not as well equipped with infrastructure and resources as in the world. It is recommended that a Creative Economy Startup Fund composed of a consortium of the Saudi Venture Capital Company, Ministry of Culture, and leading IHEs be established to invest in faculty- and student-led creative startups within the five dimensions found in the current study. Findings demonstrated that students of business-integrated programs are three times more likely to launch creative businesses (OR = 3.1, $p < 0.001$), but 67% of interview informants cited absence of seed funding and mentorship infrastructure as the primary barrier to startup formation. Responsible body: Saudi Venture Capital Company (fund management), Ministry of Culture (sector priorities), participating IHEs (deal flow and incubation).

From above the researcher answered the research questions as follows:



The alignment between Saudi IHEs and creative economy is low, and there is very big gap between the curricula and market needs. Out of the included Saudi IHEs, only 8% have linked such programs to creative economy sectors. The average industry link score across all creative sectors was only 2.8, which fell under the low category. Regarding digital media and technology, 555 of the participants think that they will not be fully ready for employment after their graduation, due to the courses being outdated and failing to incorporate AI augmented reality or monetization concepts. For arts and cultural heritage, the current programs remain isolated within colleges of humanities, and they are not integrated with tourism management or digital heritage platforms. The students also reported that they lacked innovation and cross-cultural engagement in design and architecture. Some programs such as fashion and luxury goods are very rare in Saudi intuitions. Moreover, the participants' competency in handling AI was found to be at only 2.5 whereas the target of Saudi Vision 2030 was 4.7.

Regarding the second research question, the perceptions of students toward their readiness for employment and confidence was found to be statistically significant between interdisciplinary creative-economy programs and creative economy, education, and socio-cultural outcomes. The participants revealed that 34% of them believe that they are ready for employment in comparison to students in traditional single-discipline programs as the means of both programs were 3.84, and 2.86 respectively, and the t- value was 1.238, Cohen's d = 0.6, p-value was 0.001. In the same vein, interdisciplinary students demonstrate 28% higher confidence in entrepreneurial task with interdisciplinary programs mean was 3.61 and single-discipline mean was 2.82. Notably, interdisciplinary students showed 41% greater perception of the relevance to Saudi Vision 2030 goals than their counterparts of single-disciple, with interdisciplinary mean at 4.01 and the mean for single-discipline programs at 2.84 with $p < 0.001$. These patterns are consistent across gender, institutional features, and geographical locations revealing a strong effect of interdisciplinary program design. Qualitatively, industry informants confirmed that the most successful creative entrepreneurs they hired came from programs that forced students to work across disciplines, which enabled them to understand both creative and business aspects. Faculty members also described how interdisciplinary culminating projects correlated with higher students' startup intention scores.

For the last research question, the study suggested four main categories of reform of creative-economy education in Saudi Arabia. For the curriculum and pedagogy development, one of the most demanding aspects in need of urgent change is the creation of a national creative economy curriculum framework in collaboration with the ministry of education, industry stakeholders, ministry of culture and the general entertainment authority. This combined curriculum should include five key components: digital and AI technologies; business knowledge and entrepreneurship courses as obligatory and not elective courses; sustainability and environmental learning outcomes; culminating project undertaken in collaboration with students from at least



three different disciplines and community and cultural engagement. Thus, the transformation or reform of Saudi IHEs must move beyond being creative to being fully creative universities. This reform necessitates supporting interdisciplinary research and practice, locating creative industry clusters, developing cultural entrepreneurship and funding, and mentoring projects related to them. Furthermore, establishing international collaborations with leading universities in creative economy is also the need of the hour. There should be gender equity measures in Saudi IHEs admissions, faculty participation, and financial funds, especially in filmmaking, music, and tech-dependent creative sectors as it was noticed that some regions have greater creative economy education opportunities than others, highlighting the need for balance and studied measures to have equal creative economy education opportunities for all regions in Saudi Arabia.

Limitations and scope for future research

The cross-sectional design limits the ability to make causal inferences between stages of interdisciplinary program participation and employment and/or entrepreneurial outcomes. All quantitative data were collected using one survey instrument for self-reported data, and common method bias is considered a risk due to this method. Employment readiness and entrepreneurial confidence are subjective perceptions and have not been objectively measured or proven. The geographic concentration in Riyadh, Jeddah, and the Eastern Province limits the generalizability of the findings to institutions across the region. Additionally, self-selection bias cannot be completely ruled out, as there may be a systematic bias towards selecting interdisciplinary programs among more motivated students. Regression controls have partially addressed observed individual differences that may affect outcome differences.

There is a need for longitudinal studies that follow students for 3-5 years to determine if perceived competency leads to differences in employment and income. Further research should be conducted in vocational training centers and regional universities to obtain nationally representative results. Causal inferences could be strengthened by using multi-source designs that include student self-reports, employer ratings, and/or students outcome registries. Comparative studies could provide context to the findings in the GCC region. Future research should investigate how Generative AI is impacting the eight competency domains identified, such as AI fluency and critical creativity, as technology evolves rapidly. The gaps identified today may be the most conservative and not necessarily a stable measure of competency.

10. Conclusion

The study shows that the creative economy is not only a diversification opportunity for Saudi Arabia's economic development but also an important tool in achieving the country's ambitious human development targets as outlined in the Vision 2030 development plan, particularly in the areas of Saudi Arabia's sociocultural development, youth empowerment, and the delivery of its ambitious human development targets. This evidence proves that Saudi Arabia has extraordinary natural assets to develop a creative



economy, including its cultural heritage, its youth and technologically advanced population, unprecedented investment in infrastructure, and its strategic location for global talent and investment. However, the role played by higher education and vocational training in turning natural assets into value in the creative economy is less developed, and the focus of this study. The study reveals critical gaps in the Saudi IHEs in terms of the relevance of the curriculum, establishment of interdisciplinary courses, cooperation with industry, and development of skills, which if not addressed could hinder the achievement of Vision 2030 targets for the development of the creative economy in Saudi Arabia. The proposed directions – curriculum overhaul, institutional development to become a Creative University, measures to tackle equity concerns, and assistance for research and startup cultures – are ambitious but attainable objectives. They must be anchored by a comprehensive vision and promoted through the joint efforts of the government, academia, industry, and not-for-profit organizations that would result in a productive, culturally rich, socially equitable, and environmentally sustainable creative economy in Saudi Arabia. This study should build on the following research: The employment path of creative economy students should be traced; the study should be conducted on a national level, comparing creative economy education models that are appropriate for the Gulf region; and valid instruments should be formalized to measure the readiness of institutions for the creative economy.

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